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Senator J. Windy Boy  
Montana State Legislature  
Helena, MT 59601

February 21, 2013

Dear Senator Windy Boy,

Aloha from Hawaii.

At the invitation of Mr. Tom O'Boyle of the Chippewa Cree Cultural Resource Preservation Group, I am writing in support of Senate Bill #342 (A Bill for an act entitled "An Act Establishing the Montana Indian Language Preservation Pilot Program).

There are 6000-7000 languages spoken in the world today. In the rush to homogenized commercial "efficiency", 50-90% of these may become extinct by 2100. Saving as many as possible would pay tremendous social dividends to those cultures at risk. In his book: "When Language Dies", K. David Harrison notes that "Language is the means by which individuals establish that they are members of the same cultural community." Language shifts often accompany (or perhaps are the canary in the mine) for cultural shifts. When a language dies, the culture it conveyed is doomed to extinction.

It is widely recognized that poetry is nearly impossible to translate. The words may be replaced, but the nuances, alliteration, rhythm, and rhyme cannot be duplicated. The image of the world captured through the lens of a unique language and culture becomes blurred and is a less powerful expression of the poet's art.

Significant relational and identity conflicts can arise with generational first language loss. Children become alienated from their parents and grandparents. This loss of cultural cohesion has been cited for the rise in drug and alcohol abuse and increasing suicide rates in those people whose language is threatened.

There is a tradition in Montana of such careful attention to the preservation of the cultural legacy of its native people. For generations, the Blackfeet were relatively sedentary and came to describe the plants, animals, elements and the supernatural in their own unique way. Recently however, keepers of this unique vision were few in number. The Piegan Institute was established to save the Blackfeet language from extinction. Perhaps it is time for a broader state-wide effort.